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ABSTRACT

In spite of attempts to destigmatize themselves with the "black is beautiful" rhetoric, efforts by Americans of African descent to disavow their imputed inferiority have not been successful. The black is reacted to as a handicapped person by the white American. Whites look with disdain on black-white sexual relationships, black language, and culture. They discriminate against blacks in housing, education, employment, religion, and criminal justice. The effect of these responses on the self-concept of the rejected black person is self-hatred, because consciously and unconsciously the dominant person's acceptance means so much to him. The most direct way to remove self-hatred in black Americans is to excise racism in the society at large. (Author/DE)

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Self-Hatred in Americans of African Descent*

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In 1851, Alexis de Tocqueville (1851, p. 338), a French sojourner in the United States, observed that

> The negro (sic) makes a thousand fruitless efforts to insinuate himself among men who repulse him; he conforms to the taste of his oppressors, adopts their opinions, and hopes by imitating them to form a part of their community. Having been told from infancy that his race is naturally inferior to that of whites, he assents to the proposition, and is ashamed of his own nature. In each of his features he discovers a trace of slavery, and, if it were in his power, he would willingly rid himself of everything that makes him what he is.

Today, over a hundred years later, this description of Afro-Americans remains essentially valid, in spite of their attempts to destigmatize themselves with the "Black is beautiful" rhetoric during what is often referred to as The Negro Revolution, now come and gone. Efforts of Americans of African descent to disavow their imputed inferiority have not been successful, because white racial ethnocentrism, as language and other aspects of culture, is transmitted almost unchanged from one generation to another. The vast majority of all individuals, whatever their race or color, assumes the behavior and belief system dictated by their society (Benedict, 1934, p. 235; Frank, 1948, p. 4). In other words, racist attitudes

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in the United States can hardly be viewed as idiosyncratic (Thomas & Sillen, 1972, p. 113). They are all too "normal." In general, they are transmitted matter-of-factly from parent to offspring (Comer, 1972, p. 135).

In whites, anti-black sentiments are referred to usually as white racism. In blacks, they are aptly labelled self-rejection (Maykovich, 1972). In each case, the object of rejection is the black person. Each group, infected by the same cultural phenomenon, denies its affliction, because culture hides more than it reveals, especially from its expondents. Today, as in the past, Afro- and Anglo-Americans continue to transmit anti-black attitudes via the family and other basic institutions in society (Comer, 1972, p. 135).

Manifestations of Black Self-Rejection

In the American society, people are apt to become a part of the mainstream community to the extent that they approximate the norm of that group in terms of perceived similarities. Of all the racial and ethnic minorities, the Afro-American is the most severely excluded, even though culturally he is the most assimilated by condition of national contributions, heritage, language, religion, values, and other significant cultural components. His physiognomy and the former slave status it conjures up constitute formidable exclusion variables for the black. He is reacted to as a handicapped person by the "normal" white American (US Department of HEW, 1970, p. 194); and although the barriers thus created between the two are symbolic, they are nevertheless impenetrable. The black is to the white

a phobogenic object, a stimulus to anxiety (Fanon, 1967, p. 151). There is in the white person an avoidance reaction induced by the fear that direct contact with the stigmatized person may be contaminating, or that the person will somehow inflict physical, psychic, or social damage to him. The effect of these responses on the self-concept of the rejected person is profound, because consciously and unconsciously the dominant group person's acceptance means so much to him (US Department of HEW, 1970, p. 31). An examination of how the Anglo-American's rejection of the Afro-American reflects itself in the social order helps to further explain the current self-hatred in Americans of African descent.

Male-female bonding. During slavery, whites were entangled in an approach-avoidance conflict over blacks. Slaves, although socially different, were biologically the same as their masters. For the white men in particular, blacks, especially black females, represented simultaneously the good and the bad. Siegfried (1954, p. 68) indicates that despite the reputed official repulsion of whites for blacks during that period, in fact blacks had for whites a unique sex appeal. In supporting this observation, Canu (1937, p. 314) declares that white men were so attracted to slave women that George Washington and other respectable citizens participated gladly in what soon became a national masculine pastime.

White males were so fascinated with black women that they considered it only reasonable that black men were interested equally in white women. That thought was revolting to them. Before the colonies became states, legislation was enacted to prevent their national fears

from becoming realities; i. e., to make sure that black men, whom they viewed as being part beast at best, would stay clear of white women. It is evident from the vast number of mulattoes reported in each state by the U. S. Census Bureau until 1918 that white males violated with alacrity and impunity laws prohibiting miscegenation. Although black females were human enough to be enjoyed sexually by white men, black males were too beastly to copulate with white females.

In fact, blacks were considered so inferior that offspring resulting from master-slave mating were almost always considered and treated as slaves. A person with even 1/16th Negro blood was considered then as he is today a black.

Even though the U. S. Supreme Court voided the law against miscegenation in 1967, throughout the country the sight of cross-racial couples causes heads to turn, especially the heads of white men when the pair is a black man and a white female. Continued social sanction against white-black bonding is an example of how deep and emotionally laden is white rejection of blacks.

In black marriages, white racism manifests itself as self-hatred, a phenomenon destructive of unions. A spouse who hates himself is in no psychological condition to love another person. In his partner he sees a reflection of his own self-repelling ugliness. This phenomenon helps to explain the lack of stability in black unions. On the other hand, a black-white marriage is more durable, because the black has entered into a co-equal relationship with a white person (Grier & Cobbs, 1968, ch. 5). As a result, he feels half-white.

Accordingly, his self-esteem in enhanced; and to that extent, the marriage is more stable than a black-black union, if it were not for the stress inflicted upon the bond by a disapproving, anti-black society.

Language. Language, verbal and nonverbal, is an aspect of culture; and as such, it is a significant barometer of one's station in life. For example, during slavery, as is the case today, blacks spoke English, a fact which indicated that the society was rather open for them, linguistically speaking (Cohen, 1956, p. 114). However, the English they spoke then as now was imperfect by white standards, which suggested subservient, distant, or infrequent co-equal contact with Anglos. In addition, slaves, perceived as inferior to whites, were forbidden to speak as if they were equal to their masters (Doyle, 1937, p. 72), who expected them to confirm their inferiority in their limited vocabulary, lazy pronunciation, and retarded thought processes.

Nonverbally, slaves were expected to communicate at all times their subservient status. Their walk was expected to be slow and stuped; their articulation, lazy; and their thought processes "sleepy," as they demonstrated by frequently scratching their heads or waking up the brains whenever they talked to whites (Vontress, 1967). Today, it is not unusual to see black college presidents unconsciously scratching their heads when they are in conference with high status whites.

Perceived differences between Anglo and Afro human beings were so real to whites that they colored the English language as used in

the New World. For example, the word "white" came to mean clean, free from dirt, or free from fault, sin, or taint. On the other hand, black has been associated with not only the forbidden (e. g., an incestuous object) but also with the dirty (impure), debased, sinister, evil, and magic (Gearhart & Schuster, 1971). Consider, for example, the words "blackguard" and "blackhearted."

Contemporary blacks have done little to purge the American vocabulary of demeaning anti-black references. Instead, they continue their efforts to approximate the speech sounds of those they want so desparately to be like. Nathan Hare (1965, p. 47) was one of the first black scholars to point out this phenomenon. One black educator (Green, 1963) declared not long ago that the Negro speech pattern was so unacceptable (presumably to whites) that it remains the last formidable barrier to integration. It seems clear that blacks, in their wish to shed their Negroidness, are terribly concerned about the way they talk. They are disturbed that they do not sound more white.* This, then, is another indication of their self-rejection.

Housing. Other than male-female bonding, there is no area of life in which blacks are reacted to more as being stigmatized than in housing. The whites' aversion to living in close proximity to Afro-Americans is a recent phenomenon. During slavery, it was common practice for master and slave to share the same living quarters. After the Civil War, whites and blacks lived close together, especially

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*Current research in progress by the writer confirms this phenomenon.

on large plantations where sharecropper huts ringed the Big House. Until about thirty years ago, it was common throughout the South for whites and blacks to share the same neighborhoods.

However, as the blacks' push for equality began to show legal fruition and as it was no longer generally understood and accepted that blacks, ipso facto, were inferior to whites, it became more threatening for Anglos to live in areas populated by the stigmatized, who no longer wanted to act stigmatized. Easy mobility provided by the automobile also made it possible for affluent whites to flee the great cities to which blacks had flocked during and after World War II.

So today, metropolitan housing "rings" populated overwhelmingly by whites continue to ripple further and further from the cores of major cities, which are populated mainly by blacks. Whites flee from neighborhoods as soon as a black family moves in, even before they discover that their new neighbor is perhaps an MD, a fact which indicates clearly that they are running from the symbol of stigma---blackness and all that the color conjures up in their minds about Afro-Americans. Those unable to flee almost never reveal to their ethnic confreres that they live in a racially mixed area.

On the other hand, blacks, the stigmatized, continue to search out all-white neighborhoods and all that such locations imply. Those who manage to find one and can afford to purchase into the area usually brag to their friends, black and white, that they live in an integrated neighborhood. Even so, it is clear that Anglo-Americans, in their

flight from blacks, are rejecting them; and that Afro-Americans, in their effort to find white areas in which to live, are in pursuit of their rejectors, in order to "better themselves," which may be another way of saying, in order to destigmatize themselves.

Education. Historically, whites were hostile toward education for blacks for at least two reasons. An educated Negro destroyed their image of him as an inferior being, incapable of learning from books. The other was their terrible fear of "a smart nigger." During slavery, legislation was passed, making it a legal offense to teach slaves to read and write. During Reconstruction, the Freedmen's Bureau set up schools for blacks throughout the former Confederacy, where they were kept open with great difficulty, because Night Riders constantly destroyed the buildings and intimidated the white carpetbagger teachers.

Finally, the southern states, in which almost all blacks lived during the first few decades after the Civil War, established separate schools for blacks. Eventually, the schools came to be referred to as separate and equal. In general, little thought was given to the idea of blacks and whites sitting in classrooms together, a possibility revolting to most whites. By 1954, School Desegregation shocked the Nation and has remained to this day an emotional issue yet to be resolved. On this issue alone, whites all over the country and of all stations in life have demonstrated and verbalized their intense rejection of blacks. Tacitly, they, in doing so, are reaffirming, willynilly, their belief that Negroes are stigmatized, inferior creatures. The rejection, overt or covert, perforce affects the

self-esteem of the rejected.

On the other side, blacks, in spite of the undisguised white hostility to their presence in integrated classrooms, continue to push not just for an equal education, but for a white education, an education in an environment which confirms their equalness as human beings. In such a setting, the black student's self-concept and academic achievement are enhanced simultaneously (Crain & Weisman, 1972, p. 171). In fact, blacks need school integration not just to obtain an equal education, but in order to achieve psychological integrity as well.

Employment. During slavery when there was an abundant supply of black manpower, slaves did almost all of the work that was dirty, demanding of physical exertion, or that was otherwise undesirable. The professions and skilled trades were routinely reserved for whites. In large measure, there were two categories of work: white work and black work. Today, in order to communicate that he has had a hard day on the job, it is not unusual to hear the contemporary white workman use the same expression used by his forebears: "I worked like a nigger today!"

In 1974, over a hundred years since The Emancipation Proclamation, it is still obvious that whites and blacks are separate and unequal in the world of work. They are separate in terms of the types of jobs they can obtain. In general, blacks are found in the lowest paid and least prestigious jobs in government and business and industry. For example, in Washington, D. C., almost all federal employees in GS 1-5 jobs are black. At the other end of the scale, nearly 98 percent of

the employees in GS 15-18 jobs are white. Moreover, the few blacks occupying top GS jobs are seldom in line positions. Usually, they are attached to the Office of the Director, Administrator, or Secretray of the various governmental agencies, very often as the staff person in charge of Equal Employment Opportunity.

Black and white inequality in the world of work is clearly evident. For example, on integrated work crews such as road gangs, where presumably each man is equal, one observes often that the man in the hole digging is usually black and the one at the top administering to his needs is white. In such work settings, there seems to be a tacit agreement as to who is to do the exerting, dirty work. Although federal legislation pertaining to equal opportunity has been on the books for a few years now, blacks continue to be unfairly treated in terms of raises, promotions, and other work related rewards. In general, inequality is evident in terms of equal pay for equal credentials. For instance, the average white high school graduate earns slightly less than the black with a college degree.

In a society where a person's work and the amount of income derived from the job determine in large measure how he feels about himself, it is easy to see how the black person's place in the world of work necessarily is assaulting to his self-image. His low place on the occupational hierarchy in the United States is another direct result of anti-black sentiments and behavior in society at large.

Religion. During slavery, whites debated in local, state, and national legislative bodies whether the Africans should be permitted Christian status. On the one hand, they, as Christians, were

by tradition, committed to proselytizing (Jordar, 1968, p. 180); on the other, the admission of blacks to Christian fellowship implied the recognition of their equality. Moreover, literacy was prerequisite to the knowledge of God; and that, too, was a dangerous thing for blacks to have. They might rebel against their condition. Finally, the position that Christianity would in fact make slaves more content with their status on earth by causing them to anticipate freedom in the Hereafter won appeal among slaveholders. Although blacks were admitted eventually to Christian fellowship, they were separated from whites in the House of God as they were on the outside.

After the Civil War, whites dropped all pretext of Christian fellowship with blacks and literally stood in the church door, denying Negro Christians admission to worship, an act which forced the former slaves to establish their own churches and pattern their religious rituals as best they could after those who rejected them.

To this day, no institution other than the family is more segregated than the church. This is so because the church, although a place of worship, is much more than that. It is a social center where people meet and greet as equals, not so much in the eyes of God, as in their own eyes. In 1974, as it was a hundred years ago, whites prefer to worship God with their own kind. This explains why on Sunday mornings, whites and blacks throughout the country pass each other on the way to their separate churches to worship the same God. For all Americans, this day, God's day, is the most segregated day of the week.

Although white Christians rejected them, blacks have continued

trying to approximate their manner of worshipping God. However, in recent years, the Baptist and Methodist denominations have come to represent for many blacks the Negro stereotype. Afro-Americans of all walks of life are now stripping themselves of their earlier religious identifications. An increasing number, in their effort to break out of the ghetto into the mainstream, are converting to Catholicism (Roy, 1964). Others deny their Negroidness by embracing Judaism, declaring themselves to be the original Chosen Ones (Brotz, 1964). Still others adopt the Islamic faith (Essien-Udom, 1964). In divesting themselves of traditional black religion, Americans of African descent are not only rejecting their slave heritage; they simultaneously are approximating more nearly the white ideal, an act which must be viewed as an effort to enhance their self-concept.

Criminal-justice. In the New World, southern colonial planters prospered. The soil was rich and the manpower from Africa plentiful. In fact, whites imported so many slaves during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries that blacks outnumbered them in many parts of the South. Wherever they went, they were inundated by a sea of black faces. Simultaneously, stories of blacks murdering whites in northern colonies spread throughout plantation communities. Blacks quickly became phobogenic objects. Although slaveholders could discipline easily the Africans they owned, they needed a uniform way of keeping all Negroes in check, not only to protect the institution of slavery, but to insure life and limb as well. To do this, slave codes were enacted throughout the South. These harsh laws gave every white man

the right to act as policeman, judge, and jury in dealing with slaves.

After the Civil War, there remained in this country until the middle of the 20th Century two sets of laws: one for whites and one for blacks. Although the degrading Jim Crow laws were voided during the 1950's, it is obvious today that a criminal-justice system administered by Americans infected with racism is far from being colorblind. The black person finds that his pigmentation is a problem for him, not so much because of the color per se, but because of how whites react to it. Because of it, he is more apt than whites to be stopped on suspicion by authorities; if booked, he is more apt to be indicted; if indicted, more apt to be found guilty; and if convicted, more apt to draw a heavy sentence. When incarcerated, he, unlike whites, is usually sent to a maximum security institution where he is dehumanized with impunity by whites employed there. Moreover, parole boards react differently to blacks than they do to whites, which helps to explain the inordinate number of Negroes who serve their full time.

The criminal-justice system is so harsh on blacks that it is easy to understand why many of them get the impression that they are being punished not so much for alleged crimes as they are for being black in a society that is anti-black. Their color is so problematic for them that they would gladly exchange it for another. How can black be so beautiful when it keeps getting you in trouble all the time!

Black social systems. Rejected by whites, blacks reject themselves and become victims of their own self-hatred. The individual sees

in fellow blacks a reflection of himself whom he unconsciously hates (Bustamante, 1957). This phenomenon is so pervasive in the Negro community that all-black social systems demanding continuous association and cooperation are almost always in a state of conflict and dissension. In the family, members frequently assault one another. In church, violent tempers flare. In all-black educational institutions, bickering interactants often exchange racial epithets that would be cause for physical attack if they were directed at them by whites. Projected self-hatred also helps to explain the extremely high homicide rate in black communities.

Conflict in the black social system is dissipated to the extent that white members are introduced into the group. Their mere presence enhances the blacks' perception of themselves. For example, one would expect to find a more positive cooperative goal-striving atmosphere in a high school where one-third of the students and teachers is white than in a school where everybody is black. Where the number of whites introduced into the black social system is perforce small, the same effect can be achieved by introducing a few whites with high status positions within the system. For instance, a white principal in a predominantly black high school may provide a unified goal oriented atmosphere that a black principal would be unable to do. The white principal is a figure with whom the black faculty members can identify; and in so doing, they feel better about themselves and their black colleagues.

Conclusions

Blacks and whites are products of a culture shot through with pernicious racism. Anti-black sentiments are transmitted via social institutions with only relative modifications from one generation to another. Smuggled down through history, racism is now deeply imbeded in the psyche of whites just as self-rejection is in the unconscious of blacks. This helps to explain why individual members of each group deny their affliction.

It is important to point out also that blacks are reacted to differentially by whites. For example, women, athletes, and the middle-class are accepted more than are lower-class urban black males who are reacted to not only as stigmatized individuals but as fear-producing objects as well. Therefore, their self-acceptance differs in like manner.

Indeed, blacks are freer today than they were a century ago; but so are children, women, homosexuals, and other individuals who have been rejected or assigned an inferior status in former times.

The black self-image will change to the extent that Afro-Americans can influence the way whites view and behave toward them (Maykovich, 1972). That is, black self-concept is in the hands of whites. Black identity derives from the collective perception which white Americans have of black Americans. Negroes, unlike other minority groups, have no countervailing cultural heritage to offset the effects of rejection by whites.

Of course, the most direct way to remove self-hatred in

Americans of African descent is to excise racism in the society at large. To do this, a cultural purge would be necessary. It is doubtful that Americans are prepared to go so far to correct a problem which is not generally agreed to be a problem in the first place.

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